

GRASPING THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF BLACKS AND WHITES IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON* (A STUDY OF POSTMODERNISM)

Supriyatno

SMA Negeri 2 Jombang
mizazuhadzavala@yahoo.com

Abstrak: Identitas budaya pada suatu masyarakat merupakan ciri khas dan penanda terhadap eksistensi dan dimensi masyarakat dalam kehidupannya. Kehidupan masyarakat itu sendiri dalam makna luas berada dalam paradigma refleksi dan representasi dalam alur norma, ideologi, tradisi maupun estetika yang melekat di dalamnya, dan seharusnya tidak ada sekat dikotomi dalam ruang dan waktu dalam menerjemahkan esensi kehidupan. Hidup adalah suatu bentuk integritas dan tanggung jawab dengan tatanan nilai-nilai, harapan, cita-cita dan masa depan. Penelitian ini merepresentasikan kehidupan manusia dalam mengikuti, mendorong, menyertai bahkan berjuang bagaimana meraih identitas budaya dalam konteks rasionalitas dan sejarah. Diwarnai dengan masalah-masalah stratifikasi sosial, ras dan kesetaraan *gender*, novel ini mengungkapkan bentuk-bentuk paradoksal dan terurai tajam dalam struktur *oxymoron* yang berimplikasi pada kajian budaya masyarakat tertentu sehingga menemukan jati dirinya. Analisis penelitian ini dalam pendekatan teori post-modernisme yang dikembangkan sebagai reaksi terhadap era kemapanan modern dan seluk-beluknya, sedangkan data-data yang diperoleh dianalisis dengan metode kualitatif dengan aplikasi teknik kualitatif interpretatif melalui langkah-langkah: data dibaca secara menyeluruh, penelaahan data secara komprehensif, interpretasi makna data, dan analisis data kritis.

Kata Kunci: *Budaya, Identitas, Song of Solomon, Post-Modernisme*

Abstract: Grasping the cultural identity in a society is the characteristic and signifier to the existence and dimension of society in their life. The life of community in the broadest sense exists in paradigm of reflection and representation in the plots of norm, ideology, tradition and aesthetic involved in and it should not be the dichotomy in space and time in transferring the meaning of life. It is the forms of integrity, responsibility in orders of values, hope, ideals and futurThe research represents the life of human being in following, encouraging, accompanying, even fighting for how to reach the cultural identity in terms of rational and historical times. Colored with the problems of social stratification, race, and gender, this novel tries to convey the forms of paradoxical analyses and sharply elaborated in the structures of oxymoron in which imply on the studies of culture in a society to find out the self-identity. The analyses of the research are in the approach of post-modernism discussed as the reaction to the established modern era and its colors, meanwhile the data analyzed in terms of qualitative method with the techniques of interpretative qualitative in the steps of: data comprehensively read, interpretation of meaning and critical analyses.

Key Words: *Cultural, Identity, Song of Solomon, Post-Modernism*

INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism is the name given to the period of literary criticism that developed toward the end of the twentieth century. Just as the name implies, it is the period that comes after the modern period. It came about as a reaction to the established modernist era.

What sets Postmodernism apart from the predecessor is the reaction of its practitioners to the rational, scientific, and historical aspects of the modern age. For postmodernists this took the guise of being self-conscious, experimental, and ironic. It is concerned with imprecision and unreliability of language and with epistemology, the study of what knowledge is. It took full flight in the 1960s in the face of global social and political unrest. In 1968 it reached an early zenith with the intense students protest in the US and French, the war for independence in Algeria, and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The beginning of space exploration with the launch of *Sputnik* in 1957, culminating in the

1969 landing of men on the moon, marks a significant shift in the area of science and technology.

At the same time, Jacques Derrida presented his first paper, *Of Grammatology* (1967), outlining the principles of deconstruction. The early novels of Kurt Vonnegut Jr., and Alain Robbe-Grillet were published; Ishmael Reed was writing his poetry. The Marxist critics, Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton who saw a major shift in the social and economic world as a part of the postmodern paradigm, were beginning their creative careers. As time progressed, more and more individuals added their voices to this list: Julia Kristeva, Susan Sontag, and in popular culture, Madonna (in her openly sexual music and music videos she broke down the limits of sexuality and femininity. Still, while some believe that her career is a setback for feminist movement, others believe that she opened the doors to a wider acceptance of female and human sexuality).

Fredric Jameson explains his idea of Postmodernism, its basic principles and what caused it

to occur. He discusses what he calls pastiche and schizophrenia as they relate to the emergent social order of late capitalism. Pastiche is the loss of personal identity, which may be the result of capitalism and bureaucracies that place no importance on the individual. Another aspect of this loss of identity lies in the possibility that there is no way for writers and artists to create new styles because they've already been invented. The other focus of the essay, schizophrenia, is the clash of narratives resulting from the combination of the past and future in the present. Throughout this essay and others, Jameson takes considerable notice of the impact of capitalism on the course of social progress and current artistic expression.

The mere mention of the word postmodernism brings immediately to mind ideas of fracturing, fragmentation, indeterminacy and plurality, all of which are indeed key postmodernism figures (Malpas, 2005:5).

A. Themes of Postmodernism

1. Deconstruction

Deconstruction is the term which is created by Derrida, and it defines the basic premise of Postmodernism. It does not mean destruction, but rather it is a critique of the criteria of certainty, identity, and truth. He comments on issues of identity in Western civilization that derive from the reliance on binary oppositions. These are sets that establish a hierarchy that privileges the first over the second. He calls them violent hierarchies, and states that they gave precedence (called centering) to the central term (the first) and they marginalize the remaining term. In a set of up/down, the implication is that 'up' is preferable to and is better than 'down'. This result has important ramifications in social constructs.

2. Disintegration

One of the main outgrowths of Postmodernism is the disintegration of concepts that used to be taken for granted and assumed to be stable. These include the nature of language, the idea of knowledge, and the notion of a universal truth. In contemporary entertainment, television in particular, there has been a disintegration of the line that separates reality from fiction.

3. Cultural Studies

One major impact of Postmodernism on the structure of college and university courses is the introduction of multiculturalism and cultural studies programs. Often these are not limited by political concerns and boundaries but are economically and socially organized, a major concern expressed in the writings of Jameson, Eagleton, and other Marxist critics.

4. Multiculturalism

Another aspect of multiculturalism is combining specific interest areas into one area of study. This aspect of Postmodernism broadens the experiences of college students through the study of literature and history of people from other parts of the world. Classes whose structures combine sometimes disparate elements are found in these new departments. For example a study of prisons and

prison literature might be combined with literature from third world countries under the broad label of Literature of the Oppressed. Cultural studies may also include topics such as Arab-American studies or Women in European Literature.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article is addressed to qualitative research dealing with the study of social reality or with internal perspective. Qualitative research includes narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies. Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversation, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach. This means that qualitative researchers study things in natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Creswell, 2007:35-36).

Several lists of characters of qualitative research are: 1) natural setting (field focus), a source of data for close interaction. Researchers collect data in the field where participant's experience the issue or problem under study; 2) researchers as key instrument of data collection; 3) multiple data sources in words or images; 4) analysis of data inductively, recursively, interactively; 5) focus on participants' perspective, their meanings, their subjective views; 6) framing of human behavior and belief within a social-political/historical context or through a cultural lens; 7) emergent rather than tightly prefigured design; 8) fundamentally interpretive inquiry---researcher reflects on her or his role, the role of the reader, and the role of the participants in shaping the study, holistic view of social phenomena (Creswell, 2007:38).

The study of qualitative research refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things (Berg, 2001:3). It also goes to five features of qualitative research covering studying the meaning of people's lives, under real world, representing the views and perspectives of the people in a study, covering the contextual conditions within people live, contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human social behavior and striving to use multiple sources and evidence rather than relying on a single source alone (Yin, 2011:8).

DISCUSSION

Discussion and analysis of the paper cover (1) character and characterization; (2) analysis of the novel; (3) symbol of the novel.

1. Character and Characterization

a. Milkman Dead. The protagonist of the novel, also known as Macon Dead III. Born into a sheltered, privileged life. He grows up

- to be an egoistical young man. He lacks compassion, wallows in self-pity and alienates himself from the African-American community. His eventual discovery of his family history gives his life purpose.
- b. Pilate Dead. Macon Jr.'s younger sister. She is a fearless mother who is selflessly devoted to others. Pilate is responsible for Milkman's safe birth and continues to protect him for years afterward. She also takes care of her daughter, Reba, and granddaughter, Hagar.
 - c. Macon Jr. Milkman's father and Ruth's husband, also known as Macon Dead II. Traumatized by seeing his father murdered during a skirmish over the family farm. He has developed an obsession with becoming wealthy and his story about his childhood help Milkman's investigation into the history of the Dead family.
 - d. Guitar Bains. Milkman's best friend. He has grown up in poverty after his father was killed in a factory accident. He harbors a lifelong hatred for white people, whom he sees as responsible for all evil in the world. His murders of white people neither combat racism nor help the African-American community.
 - e. Hagar. Pilate's daughter and Milkman's lover. Hagar devotes herself to Milkman, even though he loses interest and frequently rejects her. She plight demonstrates a central theme in *Song of Solomon*: the inevitable abandonment of women who love men too much.
 - f. Macon Dead I. Macon Jr.'s father and Milkman's grandfather. Macon Dead I was raised by an Indian woman, Heddy. The mysterious legend of his identity motivates Milkman's search for self-understanding. He is also known as Jake.
 - g. Ruth Foster Dead. Macon Jr.'s wife and the mother of Milkman, First Corinthians, and Lena. After growing up in a wealthy home, Ruth feels unloved by everyone except her deceased father, Dr. Foster. Although her existence is joyless, she refuses to leave Macon Jr. for a new life, proving that wealth's hold is difficult to overcome.
 - h. Dr. Foster. The first black doctor. Dr. Foster is an arrogant, self-hating racist who calls fellow African-Americans 'cannibals' and check to see how light-skinned his granddaughters are when they are born. His status as an educated black man at a time when many blacks were illiterate makes him an important symbol of personal triumph.
 - i. Reba. Pilate's daughter and Hagar's mother, also known as Rebecca. Reba has a strong sexual drive but is attracted to abusive men.
- Because Pilate is her mother, the few men who dare mistreat her are punished.
- j. First Corinthians Dead. Milkman's worldly sister, educated at Bryn Mawr and in France. Her passionate love affair with a yardman, Henry Porter, crosses class boundaries. Her actions prove that human beings of different backgrounds and ages can share a bond.
 - k. Magdalene Dead. Another of Milkman's sisters, also known as Lena. Lena's submissive attitude in Macon Jr.'s home makes her one of the many submissive women who populate *Song of Solomon*. But her rebuke of Milkman's selfishness demonstrates her inner strength.
 - l. Michael-Mary Graham. The Michigan poet laureate. Graham is a liberal who writes sentimental poetry and hires First Corinthians as a maid. He represents the double standard of white liberals.
 - m. Circe. A maid and midwife who worked for the wealthy Butler. Circe delivered Macon Jr. and Pilate. In her encounter with Milkman, Circe plays the same role as her namesake in Homer's *Odyssey*, the ancient Greek account of a lost mariner's ten year voyage home.
 - n. Sing. Milkman's grandmother and Macon Dead I's wife. Sing is an Indian woman also known as Singing Bird. Sing's name commands Macon Dead I, Pilate, and Milkman to connect the missing links of their family history through Solomon's song.
 - o. Henry Porter. Corinthians's lover and a member of the Seven Days vigilante group, which murders white people. Porter's tender love affair with First Corinthians proves that a personal connection between two human beings is stronger than differences of background and class.
 - p. Robert Smith. An insurance agent and member of the Seven Days vigilante group.
 - q. Freddie. A janitor employed by Macon Jr. Freddie is the town gossip. He spreads rumors through the town, illustrating how information was often disseminated within African-American communities.
 - r. Solomon. Milkman's great grandfather, who supposedly flew back to Africa but dropped his son Jake shortly after taking off. Solomon's flight is a physical demonstration of the liberation. Solomon's crying wife, Ryna, and traumatized children show that escape has negative consequences as well.
 - s. Ryna. Milkman's great grandmother and Solomon's wife. When Solomon abandons her, Ryna goes mad.
 - t. Sweet. A prostitute with whom Milkman has a brief affair. Unlike Milkman's affairs with other woman, especially Hagar, his

relationship with Sweet is mutually respectful and entirely reciprocal.

2. Analysis of the novel

The complex problems of class, race, and gender, and the significance of names come into the novel. Morrison's emphasis on names and naming suggests that the novel is ultimately about recovering and accepting lost identity. It is found that the paranoid Dead in the family is Milkman. His accidental urination on Lena shows that he is uncannily aware of everything behind him, both physically and metaphorically, his fear of the past even though he is not old enough to have much of a past suggests that the trauma of his father's and grandfather's pasts haunts him from birth. The clues regarding the trauma haunting the Dead family can be found by comparing Pilate's and Macon Jr.'s memories of their childhood. They continue to be haunted by their father's death, but in telling Milkman about the ghostly encounter, Pilate shows a willingness to admit that the trauma is ongoing. Macon Jr., on the other hand is unable or unwilling to admit the fact.

Milkman is Hagar's brother may be a reminder to him that he should treat Hagar with respect. His mistreatment of her means that he is not yet mature enough to appreciate her love. He takes her love without giving, selfishly caring only for his own needs. He continues to believe that the entire world revolves around him. He also thinks that others, especially women, consider him gift from God. On the surface, these belief seem contradictory. His selfish worldview is nurtured by confirmation of his superiority, giving him no pressing reason to explore his own identity. He rejects the paranormal because he is concerned about his self-image and about being seen by others as a strange freak.

Song of Solomon takes place within a political context and the characters of Guitar and Milkman represent attitudes toward the civil rights of African-American. Guitar is a radical revolutionary, whose views are a combination of those put forth by Elijah Mohammed and Malcolm X, leaders of Islamic religious groups that fought for black self-sufficiency and separation from whites. He is an extremist within the radical community. Meanwhile, Milkman represents the calmness of the Northern black upper-middle class, which did little while blacks in the South were beaten and imprisoned. That Guitar is the only young member of the Seven Days suggests that his beliefs—those he expresses to Milkman are outdated. His hidden, terrorist way of thinking and operating is no longer justifiable or necessary in the burgeoning civil rights climate. During this era, African-Americans gained access to new ways of dealing with racism. Milkman's demand that Guitar see him as a human being rather than just a black man, however, may be too idealistic at a time

when African-Americans are persecuted for the color of their skin.

Milkman's experience of being pulled over by a white cop without probable cause, or good reason, marks the end of his privileged, idealistic worldview. This incident proves to Milkman that, in the eyes of the law, he is just another black man, guilty before proven innocent. Ironically, the dehumanizing police station experience that follows Milkman's arrest gives him a taste of being a part of the greater African-American community.

The decay of the Butlers' mansion and the disintegration of the Butler family represent the collapse of the old sharecropping order and values. Just as the manor crumbles into disrepair, so did the Butlers fall from grace—dying alone and forgotten after leading a life of luxury, their memory cursed by their neighbors. The Butler mansion also symbolizes the emptiness of possessing material goods.

Milkman is no longer the outsider he has been his whole life. He now belongs to a human community and feels that he belongs to it. Whereas earlier he feels fake compassion and fake understanding of racism, he now feels and expresses true emotions.

It is the evidence of Milkman's new identity because of his love to Sweet to be able to change his way of life and thinking. And the narrative's emphasis on the African-American oral tradition reflects Milkman's maturation. Historically, African slaves are prevented from becoming literate by their white masters, so they preserved the history and passed it on to future generations through songs and stories. His ability to use this ancestral, oral tradition as a resource being given clues arrests to his transformation from a black man alienated from black culture into a black man who embraces black culture.

Understanding his family history allows Milkman to complete his rebirth. His earlier time in Virginia, singing Solomon's song and playing the games of local children, allows him to experience a childhood he never had, and the swim in the quarry hole with Sweet serves as his baptism into his new life. The most important aspect of this rebirth is Milkman's restored faith in flight, which redeems him culturally and spiritually. Meanwhile, even in death, flight remains the symbol of life. The birds circling over Pilate's body after she is killed by Guitar's bullet suggest that physical death is not the end of her existence. And because she has so long clutched her name as a crucial part of her identity, it is clear that she too will live on. But even as Pilate's body lies still on the ground, Milkman himself takes flight. Having learned the story of his heritage he is now fully alive. It is not known whose death will result from Milkman's leap at Guitar, but the author of the novel suggests that whether Milkman kills or is

killed does not really matter, since Milkman, now endowed with a rich sense of the identity will live on after death just as Pilate will and just as Solomon has in the song that bears his name. *Song of Solomon's* themes are universal, but almost of the characters are black. It rarely meets any white characters, but it is known that an oppressive white world exists just outside the black world. The few times that white characters do enter the novel, the consequences are immediate and devastating. White people in *Song of Solomon* are a source of harm for black people: Macon Dead I is murdered by a wealthy white family, and Guitar's father dies in a factory accident because of his white boss's negligence. Also, Emmett Till is hung in Mississippi by a white, and four little girls are killed in a Birmingham church bombing. Despite the whites' catastrophic presence, the author of the novel warns that hatred and revenge are not useful responses to racism. Guitar's lust for vengeance eventually causes him to attempt to murder Milkman, a black man just like him. While Morrison understands Guitar's desire for justice in an oppressive white society.

3. Symbol of the novel

Almost all of the characters in this novel, *Song of Solomon*, are black. Some of *white characters* represent violence and wrongdoing. After Guitar's father is cut in half during a sawmill accident, for example, the mill's white foreman offers the family almost no sympathy or financial support. Likewise, Circe's wealthy white employers, the Butlers, are murderers. When they take Macon Dead I's land, they end his children's innocence. Even white animals carry negative connotations. A white bull causes, as a symbol, Freddie's mother to go into labor and die. The bull's interference with Freddie's birth represents white people's devastating interference with the African-American world. Likewise, the white peacock that causes Guitar and Milkman to become infatuated with the pursuit of wealth represent the corrupting influence of greed.

First Corinthians and Lena make *artificial roses* that represent the stilling life of the upper class and the oppression of women. The roses do not bring in much money; the purpose of the activity is to provide a mindless distraction from their boredom. First Corinthians and Lena perform their task without any enthusiasm, motivated by habit rather than conviction. In literary works, living roses often symbolize love. The artificial roses symbolize the absence of love in Macon Jr.'s household. Unlike, living plants, the artificial flowers convey only the depression of their makers.

Gold represents Macon Jr.'s obsessive pursuit of wealth. Gold is irresistible to men in the novel, who violate their principles in order to get it. For

example, Milkman robs his aunt, Pilate, because he wants to be wealthy and independent. Likewise, Guitar's desire for gold motivates his attempted murder of Milkman. Finally, Macon Jr. spends a lifetime pursuing gold without any greater goal beyond accumulation.

CONCLUSION

The description of the novel focuses on two morally and ethically which are represented within the some black and white family and search heroic quest for the cultural identity as the one of the members of community and natures of place within society life. Life itself involves the freedom of life, freedom of speech, no discrimination, no disparity of race, etc. Basically, men are equally created by God. Human beings may not be in the dichotomy situation, all are equal in everything. So this enables the existence of plurality in society life, and each individual must respect the natures of plurality and multiculturalism because there are so many different things in community life, such as, the way of life, the way of thinking, concepts of ideology, concepts of aesthetic, etc. And life should be co-operative, mutual understanding, and peaceful, like the characteristics of postmodernism involving free concepts of thinking, free concepts of culture, plurality, and multiculturalism.

REFERENCES

- Bloom, Harold. (2009). *Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon*. Bloom Literary Criticism.
- Gale. (2009). *Literary Movements for Students*. Second Edition. 27500 Drake Road Farmington Hills., MI., 48331-3535.
- Malpas, Simon. (2005). *The Postmodern*. Routledge. 270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016.
- Morrison, Toni. (2002). *Song of Solomon*. Spark Publishing. A Division of Spark Notes 120 Fifth Avenue, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10014.
- [file:///C:/users/NB205/Documents/Toni Morrison/-wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.htm](file:///C:/users/NB205/Documents/Toni%20Morrison/-wikipedia,the%20free%20encyclopedia.htm). Retrieving on Wednesday, 3-rd January 2018.